

COMMENTARY ON “INDIVIDUAL LIFE, SOCIAL LIFE, AND DIALECTICAL KNOWLEDGE”: LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INDIVIDUATION

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In his article, Steimberg (2024) meticulously reconstructs the determinations of human metabolism as a life process whose unity lies in the network of relationships established by the biological individuals that constitute its prerequisite. In this reconstruction, he identifies labor as the mediation that generically distinguishes the human animal, as the specific mode in which it “[...] appropriates the other natural forms that precede, accompany, and sustain it” (Steimberg, 2024, p. 8).

In this commentary, we would like to set out the questions that the article has raised for us regarding the role of language in the production of individual consciousness in the “process of social individuation” (Steimberg, 2024, p. 11), as well as the questions it raises regarding the relationship between consciousness and language.

If the action of human beings as living subjects, as beings who establish their own presuppositions and therefore act “as a whole that coordinates itself in pursuit of an end” (Steimberg, 2024, p. 3), essentially consists of the exercise of the powers of social labor by concrete individuals, then the articulation of individual labors is always both a condition and a means of realizing this metabolic process. That which, as Steimberg points out, only appears from the outside as a “coordination” of individual labors requires, in any case, the reciprocal externalization of social being (Inígo Carrera, 2013).

In other species whose self-production also relies on individual differentiation and the “coupling” of individual behaviors, such “coupling” can take the form of a distribution of chemical substances, including hormones, among the individuals of the colony (Maturana; Varela, 2003). In the human species, whose metabolism relies on the production of means that allow the transformation of forms in nature into means for human life, only symbolic articulation has possessed the plasticity capable of carrying the diversification of interactions then possible. Human life is realized, as a consequence, in language.

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As Steimberg states, “[...] the capacity to direct oneself by taking oneself as an object is already characteristic of all forms of life, not only human life” (Steimberg, 2024, p. 14). However, in the case of the human species, “[...] the determinations of the biological self-become [...] a power that actualizes itself in the social being, in the social form adopted by the process of social individuation and only exists in act as a social self” (Steimberg, 2024, p. 15), or socially produced self.

Under these conditions, awareness of one's own distinction from the environment exists as consciousness, that is, as knowledge that is known in its condition as such. To know oneself by knowing is the way of being a bearer of a social being. Put another way, there is no way to perform an individual contribution to social work without what one is for the collective subject² taking the form of a consciousness.

If this specifically human modality of self-knowledge is what is externalized as language (Iñigo Carrera, 2013), if language is “[...] the form of social relationship in which individual conscious subjectivities coordinate their action as organs of the process of social metabolism” (Iñigo Carrera, 2021, p. 169), does this mean, perhaps, that in the history of the species or in that of each individual, consciousness is an attribute that “precedes” the ability to express oneself through language?

Vygotsky (2012), following Bühler, presents conscious and voluntary action as another side of the production of means of production and that action, finally, as a condition of language.

However, for Vygotsky, this does not mean that thought and language do not have different genetic roots, that they do not develop along different lines, that they do not establish a constant mode of relationship with each other, or that, both in the phylogenesis and ontogenesis of thought and language, a pre-intellectual phase in the development of speech and a pre-linguistic phase in the development of thought cannot be clearly distinguished (Vygotsky, 2012, pp. 143-44).

This leads us to consider the role of language in the development of the “biological self” as a self-positing by the process of social individuation.

Trần Duc Thao (2020) offers a detailed hypothesis about how the linguistic sign was constituted through collective production, in the form of reciprocal indication, a reciprocal call of attention to the object to be appropriated. Social reciprocity, the content of the (simultaneously gestural and vocal) sign of indication, is immanent to the linguistic sign. It is reasonable to think that the way in which this reciprocity is carried as self-knowledge is also immanent. And, in any case, it has been (increasingly) through the mediation of this sign that the recursiveness inherent in life assumes its own form in the human species, becomes consciousness: in the remaining mental image that each individual retains of their group, they see themselves sending the sign in question, based

²That, as Steimberg rightly points out, it does not exist if it is not “carried in the individual subjects to which [it] gives rise” (Steimberg, 2024, p. 12) and is an “immanent and not transcendent determination with respect to the individuals in whom its reality is already manifested” (Steimberg, 2024, p. 12).

on the experience of repetition or echo (Trần Duc Thao, 2020, pp. 44, 85). Language is (increasingly) the way in which the individual self is articulated as an organ of social life.

This process (the formation of individual consciousness that articulates the individual self as such an organ) takes, in each generation, the form of the internalization of speech directed at the infant as an internal conversation with oneself, with the intermediate step of “egocentric speech” (Vygotsky, 2012). Specifically, it is the voluntary nature of mental operations that occur through the mediation of language, and, in particular, voluntary attention, which is produced by directing the infant's attention through signs (Vygotsky, 2017) that the infant can then direct themselves, first aloud and then internally.

In general, then, any expansion of the limits of consciousness as a result of the development of social labor is carried out through the production, by language, of the “personality” of new individuals (Luria, 1987, pp. 23–24), since consciousness is that continuous internal recursion whose contents “depend” on language. The word, therefore, is a concrete modality of historical development. Consequently, there is no movement of the materiality of social life that does not have as its form of realization “discursive interaction” (Voloshinov, 2018)³, nor is there any transformation of the modalities of expression through signs that is not a form of that movement.

³However, unlike what we have attempted to do here, Voloshinov presents language as a form of sign material situated “between socially organized individuals” and thus appearing as “their environment” (Voloshinov, 2018, p. 33), as an “interindividual” territory. Language would consequently be an “ideological chain” that “stretches between individual consciousnesses” and “unites” them a posteriori—as if it were a third party that highlights the external character that, in his view, exists between individuals, social being, and language—even though each individual consciousness can only exist once produced through signs in the process of social interaction (Voloshinov, 2018, pp. 31–32).